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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001246

SIPDIS

BANGKOK FOR HOWELL HOWARD AND WINSTON BOWMAN
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STATE PASS HHS/NIH
STATE PASS HHS/CDC

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

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AMGT, MG, RP
SUBJECT: MGSF01: H1N1 ANXIETY IN THE PHILIPPINES

REF: A) MANILA 0913 B) MANILA 0941 C) MANILA 0959 D) MANILA 1043 E)
MANILA 1108

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: While the number of H1N1 cases in the Philippines remains low (54) and there have been no related deaths, high-profile media coverage and precautionary university closures have increased anxiety levels among the Philippine public. Mission continues to work with Philippine authorities to disseminate appropriate prevention messages to the public, while Post management has continued efforts to allay fears and remind Mission staff of flu prevention measures. END SUMMARY.

Philippine Department of Health Shifts Strategy

2. (SBU) The Philippine Department of Health reported June 9 it had confirmed 54 H1N1 cases, with an additional 148 suspected cases awaiting laboratory results. The Department of Health has shifted its H1N1 strategy after determining that the local case profile is mild. It will stop contact tracing, which has little benefit for a fast-spreading illness, and only hospitalize people with high-risk preexisting conditions. In an effort to put the flu danger in perspective, the Philippine Health Department pointed out that dengue fever has infected over 6500 people and caused 62 deaths in the Philippines in the first four months of 2009.

Delayed University Openings

3. (U) Nonetheless, fears over more widespread infection led several major universities to close or delay the start of the new school year, which traditionally begins in June. De La Salle University in Manila closed June 4 and advised students and faculty to confine themselves to their homes until June 14 after an exchange student was diagnosed with H1N1. Since the closure, 13 more De La Salle students have been diagnosed with H1N1. At least six colleges and universities delayed opening for several weeks after the normal June 1 start of the school year in order to allow returning students and staff time to complete the self-quarantine period encouraged by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education.

4. (U) The Philippine Department of Health determined the H1N1-positive university students only had mild flu cases, and have advised against school closures in the future, even with confirmed cases. But media reports continue to spotlight the relatively small number of cases, keeping it on the front pages, and many of the stories have focused on the nationality of the flu sufferers, or their recent foreign travel, adding a hint of anti-foreigner bias to the issue.

Mission Partners with Philippine Health Department

15. USAID is continuing to work closely with the Philippine Department of Health to produce flyers, posters, leaflets, and other public-information materials on proper hand washing, cough manners, and other measures people can take to avoid catching and spreading H1N1. This reinforces ongoing handwashing campaigns, including the Ambassador's participation in an Earth Day event to demonstrate correct handwashing procedures to mothers with young children.

Reassuring Public of U.S. Troop's Health

16. On a June 4 trip to Zamboanga, Mindanao, where several hundred U.S. military personnel with the U.S. Joint Special Task Force are temporarily deployed, the Ambassador spoke to local media and noted that U.S. military forces undergo thorough medical screening before deployment and are regularly observed by trained medical staff. Emphasizing that the United States takes seriously the health of all U.S. personnel and our obligation not to spread disease, she encouraged proper hand washing and cough manners as ways to stay healthy and avoid spreading communicable diseases.

Putting Disease in Perspective

17. Post Management has continued its active information campaign for Mission personnel, emphasizing that no cases of H1N1 have been found within the Embassy community and that all the cases reported among the Philippine public have been mild. The international schools where most Embassy children attend classes follow the American school year and are currently on summer break.

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